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AUTHOR Roundy, Nancy
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ABSTRACT

Many writing process researchers have shown that students make only minor mechanical changes instead of revising their documents significantly. Effective revision pedagogy must address this problem by encouraging revision of content, arrangement, and style, and by directing student attention to all levels of the document, from the overall essay down to individual words. Applying five revision principles to the macro-and micro-levels of documents can provide a pedagogical program for teaching revision in technical writing: (1) amount and kind of detail, (2) appropriate emphasis, (3) logical progression, (4) stylistic appropriateness, and (5) mechanical accuracy. Since only the last of these is concerned with minor editorial changes, introducing students to these principles leads them to see revision as a more complex task. Techniques to help students practice these five principles and develop effective revision procedures include revision checklists, revision sessions on drafts-in-progress, and peer review. (A sample revision checklist is included.) (HTH)

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Nancy Roundy

Iowa State University

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REVISION PEDAGOGY IN TECHNICAL WRITING

Recent composition research has focused attention on the writing process. Although revision has not been studied as extensively as other aspects of that process, such researchers as Linda Flower, Sondra Perl, Sharon Pianko, and Nancy Sommers have documented revision's importance to successful composing.

These researchers have also shown that students do not know how to revise: they remain stuck at word level, making only minor mechanical changes instead of revising their documents in major ways. Effective revision pedagogy must address this problem in the following ways:

1. By encouraging revision of all three aspects of documents: content, arrangement, and style.
2. By directing student attention to all levels of a document: the overall document, sections, paragraphs, sentences, and words.

Applying five revision principles to maxi- and mini-levels of documents can provide a pedagogical program for teaching revision.

Revision Principles

Five principles governing revision are

- amount and kind of detail
- appropriate emphasis
- logical progression
- stylistic appropriateness
- mechanical accuracy

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The first principle concerns content, the second two arrangement, the last two style. In addition, only the last principle (mechanical accuracy) is solely concerned with minor editorial changes. Therefore, introducing students to these principles leads them to see revision as a more complex task than they had imagined. Applying the first four principles to various levels of documents and the last to minor levels then introduces students to the entire range of revision practices.

Applying the Principles

Amount and Kind of Detail

A document may contain too much information for the reader addressed or too little. A document may also contain inappropriate information. As an example of both, a long, technical discussion of a design, included in a report addressed to lay readers (e.g., upper management), should be revised for amount and kind of detail. Lay readers would require a short, non-technical discussion instead.

This principle may also be applied at levels below sections of documents. Should a definition be added to clarify a term? Should a technical word be omitted and a synonym used instead? Students must be encouraged to role-play their readers at every point in their documents, second-guessing reader needs. In addition, finding a "mock" audience (a reader close to their audience in expertise and interests) may assist with revision for amount and kind of detail, as a form of field testing.

Appropriate Emphasis

Appropriate emphasis involves arrangement for psychological effect:

stressing material important to the audience; de-emphasizing material of lesser importance or negative material. Three principles assist with achieving desired emphasis: position, amount of space, and repetition.

Position

The beginning position at all levels of a document receives most emphasis. The end is second. The middle is third and should be used to de-emphasize. These principles can help students revise for appropriate stress. For example, if they have favorable conclusions or recommendations, students should move these to the front of a document. If students wish to stress a topic sentence, they should place it the beginning of a paragraph. If they wish to stress a certain idea in a sentence, they should place the idea first, in the independent clause. If they want to emphasize a certain word in a series (e.g., profit, maximum timber potential), they should move the word to the front of its series.

Creating a skeletal or brief scratch outline of larger portions of documents (e.g., the document as a whole, sections, paragraphs) can help students visualize the progression of their details and check for appropriate placement. Examining sentences for placement of the independent and dependent clauses, and series of words for their progression can assist with smaller portions of documents.

Amount of Space

Usually, the more space devoted to an idea, the more emphasis it receives. However, extreme brevity can also be used to achieve stress, as in one-sentence paragraphs.

Students should review their documents to correlate amount of space with desired emphasis. For example if they are discussing a problem with a piece of equipment (e.g., the particular tractor a customer ordered, which is unavailable because of technical difficulties), students should be certain they have not devoted so much space to discussing the difficulty that it receives additional stress.

Repetition

Repeating words or concepts adds to the stress these receive. For example, in discussing the testing process for parts, a student might say,

> Parts for our digital dashboard are <u>tested</u> and
> <u>retested</u>, to assure customer-satisfaction.

Reviewing a document for repetition of important terms or concepts and elimination of ineffective repetition will help achieve appropriate stress.

Logical Progression

Logical progression involves arrangement for rational effect: the orderly development and coherence of all parts of a document. For example, the sections of a document must be placed to follow a rationale. Paragraphs must develop according to a discernable order. Combined sentences must be appropriately joined (by co-ordination or sub-ordination) and their connections signalled by the desired conjunctions. Appropriate transitions should be used to signal the relationships among sentences.

Patterns of development and standard reporting forms can be used to review for logical progression.

Patterns of Development

The traditional patterns of development provide students with a way of viewing their paragraphs and, for most patterns, longer sections of documents. In paragraphs, the topic sentence will often predict one or more of the following patterns:

1. Chronological--progression over time
   - Narration (giving a series of events)
   - Process description (giving a series of steps)
   - Cause/effect or effect/cause (looking forward to effects or backward to causes)
2. Spatial--arrangement in space
   - Description (sequencing parts of an object in space)
3. Relationship--relation of subjects
   - Comparison (showing similarities)
   - Contrast (showing differences)
   - Definition (separating the term from all others)
   - Evaluation (weighing subjects versus each other)
4. Analytical--separation into aspects
   - Classification (dividing a subject, then grouping the divisions on the basis of similarity)
   - Enumeration (listing aspects of a subject)
   - Exemplification (giving examples of a subject)
   - Problem/solution (identifying a problem, then providing solutions)
   - Summary (presenting the major points of a subject)

5. Progressive

- Deduction/induction (placing the main point first or last)
- Most-to-least/least-to-most important

Locating the topic sentence of a paragraph, identifying the pattern it predicts, then checking all other sentences to insure they are on the topic and follow the suggested order will assist with revising paragraphs for logical development. For example, a narrative paragraph should concern a series of events, given in chronological sequence.

The same technique will assist with revising longer sections of documents. For example, a process description should always concern a series of steps, again in chronological sequence. Skeletal outlines of paragraphs and longer sections of documents can help students visualize the progression of ideas and provide a check to see if any are extraneous or out of order.

Standard Reporting Forms

As with patterns of development, standard reporting forms (expected forms for documents) can provide a way of reviewing writing. For example, consider the standard form of a progress report:

Introduction

Reference to previous communication

Brief statement of the problem

Proposed solution

Tasks/time schedule

Purpose of this report

Preliminary assessment of findings

Discussion of work accomplished and projected

Time/task

Past Work

task #1

task #2

Present Work

task #1

task #2

Future Work

task #2

task #3

Task/time

Task #1

Past Work

Present Work

Future Work

Task #2

Past Work

Present Work

Future Work

etc.

Conclusion

Assessment of the project's status

Forms such as these give students a checklist for reconsidering their documents, with regard to content and the logical progression of ideas.

When no pattern or form suits the material, students should review the order they have followed. In addition, they should check the document

at lower levels (e.g., connections between and within sentences) to be sure it is coherent.

Stylistic Appropriateness

Stylistic appropriateness refers to suiting sentence construction, word choice, voice, and tone to the purposes of the document and the audience addressed. Students should be taught how to revise for the following factors:

1. Sentence construction
   - Combined sentences, to express an intended relationship
   - Separated sentences, to reduce complexity
2. Word choice
   - Words having appropriate connotations
   - Precise rather than vague words
   - Words with the appropriate level of generality (abstraction/concreteness)
   - Economical diction (conveying information in as few words as possible)
3. Voice
   - Effective use of the passive
     a. To de-emphasize the actor
     b. To create a formal, objective tone
   - Parallel use of voice, throughout the document
4. Tone
   - Appropriate approach to the reader
   - Parallel use of tone throughout the document

Mechanical Accuracy

Revising for mechanical accuracy is an editing procedure. Students

should edit for mechanical accuracy after solving major problems with their drafts. In this way, students avoid editing material they might later discard. However, revising for mechanical accuracy should also be stressed, since only perfect documents ought to leave students' desks.

Techniques for Encouraging Effective Revision

Several techniques can help students practice the five principles discussed and develop effective revision procedures: document-specific revision checklists, revision sessions on drafts in progress, and peer review.

Revision Checklists

Checklists of points to consider when revising specific types of documents can guide students as they revise. (A sample checklist for sets of instructions is presented in the appendix.) These checklists direct attention to content, arrangement, and style, and encourage students to address larger problems they might have with a specific document, as well as any smaller matters.

Revision Sessions

Scheduling a class period to work on the draft of each document, before it is handed in, can underscore the importance of revision. If this session begins with a time for isolating problems in their drafts, students receive practice in trouble shooting their own work. If the session concludes with peer review, students also receive feedback from an outside source. In both cases, revision checklists direct the review.

Peer Review

Students can gain practice in revision by serving as "mock" audiences for their peers. If students provide an audience profile of their readers, peers can role-play this audience and suggest appropriate revisions of content, arrangement, and style. Thus, students practice revision skills on others' documents, while also receiving feedback on their own.

Of course the developing an effective revision procedure depends on student motivation: if students do not wish to work hard on first drafts but are satisfied with less-than-perfect drafts instead, no technique will help them acquire skill at revision. However, as teachers, we must convey the findings of current composition research: effective writing depends on an equally effective revision procedure. Communicators who want to write well must know how to revise.

APPENDIX:
REVISION CHECKLIST--
PROCESS DESCRIPTION

(Sets of Instructions)

1. Does the introduction give an effective overview of the procedure?
   A. Does the introduction begin with a definition, if necessary?
   B. Would a visual aid help the reader picture the procedure as a whole or any item needed to perform the procedure?
   C. Are any necessary overall cautions, explanations, or definitions given?
   D. Are all other necessary details given, such as the purpose of the procedure, the intended audience, and any background the reader needs?
2. Are the materials needed to perform the procedure given?
   A. Is the section separated out from the introduction, if lengthy?
   B. Is the section well-formatted, using a list?
3. Does a partitioning sentence listing the major steps immediately precede the step-by-step description?
4. Are the steps effectively grouped into the largest possible wholes, then sub-divided into major steps and sub-steps (the activities carrying out major steps)? Are sub-sub-steps used, if necessary?
5. Are the steps well-formatted?
   A. Is a list used to segment sub-steps and sub-sub-steps?
   B. Is white space effectively used?
      1. Are sub-steps and sub-sub-steps indented?
      2. Are steps single spaced, with double spacing between steps?

C. Are headings used to signal major steps? Are the headings phrased in parallel grammatical form?

D. Are cautions placed <u>before</u> the steps to which they refer and effectively foregrounded?

E. Are explanations placed <u>after</u> the steps they explain and foregrounded?

6. Are steps diagrams used to help the reader visualize steps hard to describe in words?

7. Are the steps written effectively?

A. Are the sentences short? Are only one or two actions included in each sub-step or sub-sub-step?

B. Do the sub-steps and sub-sub-steps begin with imperative verbs?

8. Does the conclusion end the set of instructions effectively?

A. If trouble shooting is used, would a chart help the reader retrieve the information?

B. Would a brief recap of the steps in the procedure help the reader remember them?

C. Would the results of the procedure or its applications be of interest to the reader?